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ABSTRACT

Community colleges may fall short of the expectations made of them but they do so not by design but by lack of design. These expectations and assumptions, as commonly held by community college educators, students, and critics, include both positive and negative myths and realities. The assumptions that community college programs are inexpensive, that its students are only those who could not go elsewhere, that it brings success to students of all academic backgrounds, and that it was created to provide vocational-technical education, are myths. Lack of cohesion, orientation toward students, and active recruiting of the "new student" only in recent times, are realities. Community colleges will remain a force in society only to the degree that they (1) address the needs of a wide range of students, not just the successes; (2) find out why they lose students and how much of it is institutional fault; (3) actively seek the "new student"; (4) manage to maintain comprehensive offerings in the face of dollar shortage; (5) develop activities around which the student need to identify with the college can coalesce; (6) analyze formally whether the student orientation of the community college remains real; and (7) do not allow costs to rise to the point that students look elsewhere. By being less defensive and by sharing the results of institutional efforts, community colleges can cause some of the positive near-myths to become realities. (JDS)

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An Account of a Presentation Given at a Meeting of the Illinois Council of Public Community College Presidents--St. Charles, Illinois, May 6, 1977

Community College Expectations--Myth or Reality?

It should be said before we launch into an examination of some assumptions about the development of the community colleges that we may fall short of some of the expectations made of us but that we fall short by lack of design, not through some grand scheme. Many years ago our detractors took us on because they believed that we just couldn't do the job--that we were pretenders in academe and that we could not serve people as we proposed. Now that many of those objections have been laid to rest, there come the detractors from within. Such writers as Zwerling go more than a bit beyond scholarly research to impute motive to our failings. Somehow, Zwerling would have his readers believe that we are part of some grand scheme to hoodwink our students. I fully agree that we should examine our performance along with our press clippings, but I am weary of those who gain attention by suggesting that we are somehow conspirators in a plan to calcify the social structure of this country. After 19 years of my career given over to community college education, I still find wide commitment to some of the ideals which it has become fashionable to scoff at. Call us less than perfect in our performance, but don't say that we mean to sell our students out. Perhaps our greatest flaw is inadvertence--we just let things happen. But we can be examiners without being detractors.

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Having railed against Zwerling and his kind, it is proper to make some observations about our honest expectations. My approach here is to examine what we say of ourselves, what our critics say, and what our students say. From that reflection, some imaginary quotations have been devised. They have come from all three of the sources noted. I have stated an expectation and then suggested whether that expectation falls into the category of myth or reality.

"Only Those Students Who Can't Go Elsewhere Go to the Community Colleges."

It would appear that my first expectation is more a "straw man" than an existing expectation. This hoary old quote has been around longer than I have, but it bears looking at. We should not just sweep it away entirely. We're fond of citing our success stories about students who could have gone elsewhere but chose to attend community colleges for good cause. I could cite Medsker and Knoell follow-up studies which we're all familiar with, but I'd rather talk about students I know. To avoid running afoul of the Buckley Amendment, I'll speak only of four that I have more than a nodding acquaintance with. They lived at my house for about 20 years. I can count two Phi Kappa Phi's, one Phi Beta Kappa, one published author in a juried journal, and the winner of a student art award. Before you chuckle at parental pride, let me note that each president here could cite many examples to explode the myth that we get only the less able students.

The other side of that coin is somehow to get so entranced by our success stories that we do not readily admit that our student bodies are made up of students with a wide, wide range of earlier academic achievement. That wide range is there, and we've not addressed all of it. We haven't quite said, "The cream will come to the top," or, "Sink or swim," but neither have we uniformly given the kind of attention to those students who need greater assistance. Try to carve out additional new dollars for developmental studies and observe the gored oxen bleed. I'll avoid the "revolving door" simile, but I would observe that we have not followed as carefully as we might all of those students to whom we have said, "You're all welcome."

"Evidence Shows that Even with a Wide Range of Academic Background We Help Them to Blossom."

Much of what we do in the community colleges would be supportive of this assertion. If we're willing to narrow our vision to those baccalaureate students who actually transfer, we can point to all kinds of research which says that they do perform. We don't need to remind ourselves of the "transfer shock" phenomena and transfer differentials. That research has been around for long enough to have proved a point.

We do our in-house follow-up studies of occupational graduates and are justifiably proud of our observation that 87% to 90% of our occupational graduates get jobs related to their training. We rather sweep aside the question about the non-graduate by saying that it's not fair to expect that all

would graduate when business and industry snap them away from the college with high pay before graduation. It's just possible that some who were not graduated also are not in high paying positions.

In short, I believe our attention should be drawn to our retention rates as well as to our transfer and occupational successes. I'm not willing to take the institutional "rap" for all of the losses of students short of graduation. If it's true that our students come from a wide variety of backgrounds, it is also true that they have a wide range of goals. For us to assume that all of them have the same goals is foolish, but we also ought to be asking ourselves whether we have done all we could to help them meet their own expectations. We are inclined to list all the reasons why their dropping out is not our fault.

"Now You're Looking for the 'New Student'"

Ed Gleazer of AACJC is quoted in a recent issue of the National Chronicle to serve notice on all of our academic friends that we intend to be ardent wooers of those students who have not found their ways to our doors before. Except for our history, we could then be called institutional opportunists. Thus, our critics could say that we're just trying to maintain our little empires which we built by riding the crest of enrollments from the 60's. We have been welcoming the new student since the 50's. We are not Johnny-come-lately's in this field.

An examination of class schedules and events, student profiles and special workshops would tell us otherwise.

We may not be opportunists, because we've had our doors open to the new student for many years, but we may not have sought out those people with sufficient vigor. This may not be unlike the coach who builds his team around whatever talent walks in the door. My friends assembled here know well my views on athletic scholarships and the like, but I'm suggesting that a coach who has no money to offer still ought to be talking to prospects for his team. In something of the same way, we need to say by our actions that we want the new student--not just by some television interview telling them that they are welcome. In this seeking out of the new student, we'll also be faced with the same problem as the athletic recruiter; that is, we need to take great care that we don't mislead people by making claims we can't produce on.

"You Were Created to do the Vocational-Technical Job!"

One of the most difficult fences to straddle is that of comprehensiveness. It is easy for our critics to cite our shortcomings by picking on one or another of our several functions. When they do, our immediate reaction is to cite documents like the Illinois Community College Act. We know we're in business for more than one purpose, but we still need to hammer away at our credibility problem of being multipurpose. If we ride the transfer horse too hard, we become "big U, junior grade." If we ride the vocational-technical area too vigorously, we're trade schools.

Pursue the community services too much, and we're supplanting social agencies. Ride all of them too hard, and we go broke.

Those who pick out only the occupational mission and type-cast us in that role are, of course, wrong, but our commitment to multipurpose operation will be sorely tested in the not too distant future. I'm arguing that if we must cut our budgets in the future, that we do not do so by killing off a whole mission, and community services and the occupational programs are very susceptible.

"You May Be Comprehensive, But You're Sure Not Cohesive."

Like the time when this country needed a good five-cent cigar, the community colleges need a good substitute for the "rah-rah activities" of the 50's. We are still seeking those rallying points around which the residential college students form. One could call superficial some of the ideas which cause students to have an institutional identity, for somehow the blue and gold beanie and the big game and the prom just don't make it today. Wheels, jobs, diversity in age, varying goals--all of those work against our having some common threads which become an institutional identity. As staff members, we may even agree on goals. At my institution a Delphi study done by a doctoral student suggested that the staff shared institutional goals to a very high degree. But what grabs the staff may do little for the students.

Commitment to anything may be the problem. Social observers suggest that it is very difficult for young people to commit themselves to very much. We may swear by the work ethic only to find that students just plain don't buy it. One of the most successful private college enterprises is Oral Roberts University--at least in part because they believe in a central theme. I'm not suggesting that we lift that particular commitment, but it would certainly be satisfying to find our students rallying around something. Right now, we're still searching.

"We Are Student-Oriented."

I wish I had a nickel for every time I have declared this to the service club or my neighbors. Compared to other colleges generally in the 40's and 50's we could point to evidence that we really did care what happened to our students. The 60's should have taught all of us in higher education that students wanted to be reckoned with as persons.

I like to use the results of a follow-up study we did at our institution in 1972. As a part of our preparation for a North Central visit, we asked a sample of our former students to rank a list of assertions. The highest positive agreement was that our faculty members were available to students outside the classroom. If, as Cohen suggests, our faculty are retreating to their offices because they find less and less satisfaction in their jobs, this availability to students could change. It is entirely possible to mouth this student orientation without meaning it. Or having meant it, lapse into a state where it isn't true anymore.

I like a practice which was reported to me as I did a number of college visits several summers ago. In administrative cabinet discussions, near the end of any decision-making process, the question is asked, "How does this affect students?" It seems to me that the very act of asking the question would keep us on our toes.

"We're Inexpensive."

I know we said that we should address items other than finance because we spend an inordinate amount of time at regular meetings grousing about the buck. I must give some attention to the assertion about money because there is danger to our institutions.

My economist friends have finally brought me to the point of making a distinction between price and cost.

I don't really wish to get into the comparative hassle about whether our costs are lower than those of the lower divisions of universities. Just as they would argue against pulling out a piece of their operation, so do we if an analyst pulled out our vocational-technical costs. Even the apparently comparable cost of an English class fails of being parallel because the sections are staffed in non-comparable ways. This is all old stuff to us. What does concern me is that I've been able to look at an above-average unit cost and say, "Yes, but we're a cut above others." Even as I do that and believe it, I know that other community college presidents are saying the same thing. If our unit costs rise disproportionately to the unit costs of other segments of education, we'll have a

difficult time avoiding invidious comparisons. The man in the street will say, "Well, for that kind of money, you'd better be good."

Price to the consumer--our students--is almost inevitably tied to our costs. While many of us have been able to maintain a tuition rate which is still attractive to our students, more and more we come in the budget cycle to our last best hope for avoiding deficit. We say that this hurts us more than it hurts them, and we bump tuition again. We are not alone in this problem. Witness the dilemma of the railroads when they boosted rates as business fell off. Are we going to price out of the market the very people we wish to serve?

Future Prospect

Most of us who have committed at least a part of our careers to this movement are not sayers of doom. I do suggest that we will stay a force in society to the degree that we:

1) Address the needs of a wide range of students--not just those who become our success stories.

2) Find out why we lose students and how much of it is institutional fault.

3) Actively seek the "new student."

4) Manage to maintain comprehensive offerings in the face of dollar shortage.

5) Develop activities--academic or otherwise--around which student need for identity can coalesce.

6) Analyze formally whether our student orientation is real or a press clipping from years gone by.

7) Do not allow our costs to rise to the point where the price to our students sends them looking elsewhere.

We probably should say, unabashedly, "We're still one of the best things that ever happened to American higher education, but now that we've grown up, we're trying to be a little less defensive and a bit more critical." May I suggest that we share our institutional efforts. It won't hurt a bit to say, "We're not perfect at our place; here's what we're trying." We may cause some of those positive near-myths to become reality.

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